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TUNIS PLS PASS GENERAL WARD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/23/2018

TAGS: OVIP WARD WILLIAM MARR PREL PTER MO
SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR THE VISIT OF GENERAL WARD TO
MOROCCO

Classified By: DCM Robert P. Jackson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: General Ward, we are looking forward to your visit to Morocco. Since your last visit in February 2007, our governments have become even closer. Continuing close military-to-military cooperation, with a flourishing training/exercise program, was highlighted by Morocco's agreement to purchase 24 F-16s and other U.S. equipment, which will tie us closely for another generation. We are working on Acquisition and Cross Serving (ACSA) and Status of Forces (SOFA) Agreements and would appreciate your mentioning them. Foreign Military Financing (FMF), however, remains under threat. On the economic side, we have doubled bilateral trade and signed a Millennium Challenge Account Compact--promising almost USD 700 million for development projects over the next five years. Politically, the U.S. strongly endorsed the Moroccan autonomy proposal to resolve the Western Sahara dispute in the ongoing UN-sponsored talks.

This support on their number one international issue was much appreciated by the Government of Morocco (GOM), and helped embolden them to extend a hand to rival Algeria and to propose opening their closed border. We are now asking them to take some concrete measures to build confidence.

¶2. (C) The GOM was initially skeptical about AFRICOM. In recent months, it has been coming to terms with AFRICOM's establishment but remains concerned about any physical presence in Africa. It will be useful for you to reassure them that there are no plans to move AFRICOM out of Stuttgart in the near term, while stressing the advantages the increased focus of AFRICOM could bring on the bilateral front. One area of sensitivity is counterterrorism. The GOM has a good handle on both enforcement and efforts to counter extremism and, unlike others, keep its own military far from the issue. It would be best to avoid pushing a U.S. military role on this in Morocco. In contrast, there may be scope to enhance Morocco's role in international peacekeeping. End summary.

United States-Moroccan Military Relationship

¶3. (C) U.S. Military Engagement: Military cooperation between the USG and GOM is improving. In addition to joint training and exercises, such as the annual "African Lion" exercise, PHOENIX EXPRESS, and a handful of JCETs, both foreign affairs and military officials recently signaled a desire for strengthening military relations. The Royal Moroccan Air Force has requested the revival of MAJESTIC EAGLE, an annual air exercise that the U.S. suspended due to OIF and OEF commitments in 2003. Morocco has indicated it

would participate in Operation Active Endeavor--although substantial engagement in the operation may take years. According to a senior military advisor in the MFA, the GOM wants to improve its relations with NATO and pursue a NATO Individual Cooperation Program. In addition to its peacekeeping deployments in Africa, Morocco has under NATO hats, more than 200 troops deployed in Kosovo with KFOR. Any contribution AFRICOM could make to this effort might be well received. We could also consider how to encourage an increase in Moroccan peacekeeping capacity and engagement.

¶4. (C) Inspector General of the Armed Forces General Bennani (who serves as the CHOD, with the King as formal Commander in Chief) recently pledged to sign the Acquisition and Cross Service Agreement (ACSA) with the USG on or before the Defense Consultative Committee meeting in mid-June in Rabat. In addition, the Embassy has tabled a draft Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) but has not yet received any comments. We would appreciate your underscoring our interest:

-- in finalizing the ACSA, which would facilitate their pending purchases and

-- in receiving their comments on the draft SOFA. Washington is ready to send a high-level team to review the draft with them and hold preliminary discussions. (We are prepared for negotiations, but Washington sees no need to push them far at this stage.)

¶5. (SBU) Recent Military Purchases: Morocco's thriving security relationship with the U.S. has also been reflected by Morocco's September decision to purchase 24 F-16 fighters,

over French Rafael aircraft, for USD 2.1 billion--the single largest bilateral military purchase by the GOM from the United States. In addition, Morocco has recently agreed to purchase 24 T-6 trainer aircraft from the U.S. for an additional USD 200 million. It is also looking at armor and other materiel, principally through Excess Defense Articles (EDA). The Moroccans may express their concern at declining levels of FMF, which has declined from approximately USD 15 million in FY05 to a USD 3.6 million request for FY 08. In the past much of the FMF was used to supplement or finance EDA transfers.

AFRICOM

¶6. (C) After initial resistance, Morocco has begun to accept the formation of a regional command for Africa. Overall, the tone from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Ministry of Defense on AFRICOM basing in Africa has been, at best, cautious, given strong popular disapproval of the U.S. presence in Iraq and Afghanistan. The current Moroccan posture appears to be a reflection of the GOM's desire to accommodate U.S. policy--in keeping with Morocco's excellent military cooperation in most other areas--and a need to not move too far beyond Moroccan public opinion. Even our military interlocutors have recently said that given the negative image of the United States because of its policies in the region, Morocco will have to wait until after the U.S. presidential elections before considering hosting any kind of AFRICOM element. We have also heard criticism from Moroccan diplomatic and military leaders of AFRICOM's planned sub-regional orientation. An MFA official who attended the African dialogue conference in March of this year opined that most African countries believed AFRICOM should remain off-continent and emphasize bilateral relations with countries, not sub-regional African groups.

On AFRICOM you could productively:

-- reassure Moroccans that the headquarters will remain in Germany through at least the next year.

-- focus on concrete efforts AFRICOM could take in the bilateral relationship, including enhanced engagement and technical assistance, including for their efforts to engage

with NATO.

¶7. (S) Moroccan Relations with Africa: Morocco has been engaged in its foreign relations on the African continent in terms of supplying peacekeepers, supporting diplomatic initiatives and providing developmental assistance. Much of these efforts are directed at gaining African support on the Western Sahara dispute. Morocco currently has over 1,500 troops deployed to UN operations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Cote d'Ivoire and historically has been a significant contributor of forces for UN operations on the continent. Morocco has also played a significant role in bringing together leaders of the Mano River region, i.e., Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, to discuss cooperation and border security. Recently, the GOM reached out to Zimbabwe's opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai. Lastly, Morocco touts its support to African countries through a range of modest assistance programs.

Regional and International Issues

¶8. (C) Border Troubles with Algeria: The Moroccan relationship with Algeria remains tense and the border between the two countries remains closed. Although possessing common languages and some ethno-cultural roots, the two countries have evolved in politically divergent directions. Territorial tensions began shortly after Algerian independence, when a dispute over the demarcation of the border between the two countries in 1963 led to a brief period of hostilities known as the Desert (or Sand) War. For the last 30 years, a major bone of contention has been the Western Sahara issue and Algerian support for the self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and its political and military leadership, the POLISARIO Front. The Moroccan purchase of F-16's was apparently motivated by the sense of threat from a previous Algerian purchase of advanced aircraft from Russia. In March, Morocco publicly proposed

opening the border between the two countries, which was quickly rebuffed by the Government of Algeria (GOA). Morocco subsequently made a second private, then public proposal to upgrade bilateral dialogue, to which there has not yet been a public response from Algeria. In the interim, the two Prime Ministers met, in their role as leaders of the parties that took the North African states to independence, the highest level encounter in years, but with little broader impact.

¶9. (SBU) Western Sahara: Moroccan foreign policy is dominated by defending and seeking political recognition of its sovereignty claims over Western Sahara. The issue remains the most visible source of tension with Algeria, which has historically supported the POLISARIO's quest efforts for independence by way of a UN-sponsored referendum.

The issue provoked Morocco to leave the African Union and helped block regional integration through the Arab Maghreb Union. Approximately one year ago, Morocco proposed a new autonomy plan for Western Sahara, and a series of UN-sponsored negotiations with the POLISARIO began in Manhasset, New York. This proposal, deemed "serious and credible" by the USG, would provide Sahrawis--indigenous people of Western Sahara--autonomy in administering local affairs while respecting Moroccan sovereignty over the territory. After the recent renewal of the mandate of the UN peacekeeping mission, the U.S. announced we considered the independence option for the territory, "not realistic," which was appreciated by the GOM.

Terrorism and Extremism

¶10. (S) Terrorism: The Moroccan public shares broader Arab frustrations, magnified by pan-Arab satellite channels, over continued violence in the Israeli-Palestinian theater and Iraq. These frustrations have helped fuel a terrorist threat in Morocco, manifested in failed suicide bombings that shook Casablanca in May 2003 and targeted the U.S. Consulate in Casablanca and the private American Language Center in April

¶2007. Nonetheless, the Moroccans have been relatively successful at containing this threat to stability. U.S.-Morocco counterterrorism cooperation is robust and has led to tangible successes in preempting attacks and shutting down cells. Morocco has been pursuing an interdisciplinary approach in confronting the terror threat. In addition to pursuing vigorous law enforcement and intelligence operations against known and suspected terrorists, the GOM has worked with some success to disrupt radical recruitment by encouraging tolerant and moderating precepts of Islam and diminishing economic and social marginalization through a robust economic development policy. Existing U.S. engagement in cooperative efforts in these areas will continue, and we are seeking additional funding to support counter extremism and deradicalization programs, including through Section 1210 and the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), to include a program directed at radicalization in prisons.

¶11. (C) It is important to note, however, that partly due to the monarchy's longstanding suspicions of the military and tight controls on it, the armed forces here have no real counterterrorism role. As a result, U.S. military engagement on this issue is not viewed with enthusiasm, whether on enforcement or counter extremism. Moroccan units that have trained with U.S. Special Forces during JCETs have indicated that there is a proposal to grant the military some role in counterterrorism operations. It would be beneficial if you asked General Bennani about the military's intentions to assume this type of mission.

Moroccan Government, Politics, and Economics

¶12. (SBU) Governance: King Mohammed VI rules as well as reigns. Morocco's Constitution and reality ascribe to the Palace the balance of political power. The King has made significant political reforms, including relative freedom of expression, advances on human rights, and enhanced legal protections for women, particularly through bold revisions to the family law code in 2004, which are controversial with conservative Islamists. Partly as a result of this reform record, public support for the King and his reform agenda is generally solid.

¶13. (SBU) Parliament and Political Reform: The September 2007 legislative elections were certified as free and transparent by a team of international monitors (funded by the USG). In the elections, the Islamists performed below expectations but lead the opposition as the second largest bloc in parliament. The elections were marred by a record low turnout, broadly seen as a reflection of low public confidence in the Parliament and political parties. To address this, for the past few years, the USG has been funding capacity building programs for the Parliament and parties.

¶14. (SBU) Economics and Trade: The economy is relatively robust with growing foreign investment and remittances, increasing tourism and a booming stock market, marred by increasing disparities in wealth. Since implementation of our Free Trade Agreement on January 1, 2006, bilateral commerce has roughly doubled, Moroccan exports to the U.S. have increased 38 percent, and U.S. exports to Morocco have increased 155 percent. However, Morocco still looks economically to Europe first. Agriculture remains the sector that determines whether GDP rises or falls. In 2007, drought and a small crop limited economic growth to only 2.3 percent, but better, if still below average rain and crops this year should revive growth. Rising food prices have quickly become a principal domestic issue for Morocco, sparking sporadic protests. The Government will continue to subsidize basic goods, remembering the food price riots of the 80's and 90's that threatened the stability of the nation.

¶15. (SBU) U.S. Assistance: We are focusing our assistance to Morocco on four priorities: counterterrorism, economic growth, democracy and governance, and supporting quality education. One of the many tools to be used will be the

Millennium Challenge Account Compact with Morocco wherein USD 697.5 million will be provided over the next five years to support economic growth and reduce poverty.

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